



Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Minister of State (Apprentices & Skills)
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

27 March 2017

Dear Robert

The exclusion of Birmingham's Colleges from the Register of Approved Training Providers

We are asking you to include the three Birmingham and Solihull colleges (Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMet), Solihull College and South and City College Birmingham (SCCB) and Birmingham City University (BCU)) on the Register of Approved Training Providers (RoATP) and to ensure that they receive their full and appropriate allocation of funding for non-levy paying employers. We consider that the process that has been run by SFA to be wholly unfair and inadequate.

The three colleges have a history of strong, high quality Apprenticeship provision. All three have been graded as "Good" by Ofsted for Apprenticeship provision in their most recent inspections and all the institutions have a track record second to none in working with the great businesses of the region, including BMW, Caterpillar, Arup, the NEC group, Amey, NHS Trusts, Birmingham Airport, Birmingham City Council, Interserve and West Midlands Police. In addition, BCU are leading several sector trailblazers for Higher Level Apprenticeships for example with the BBC and the West Midlands Health Trusts.

If we can give some examples of the quality provided:

Very recently BMet was commended by Ofsted as they "*meet the needs of employers and are helping to reduce identified skills shortages in key sector areas*". The Inspectors highlighted that "*Apprentices develop their skill levels well beyond the requirements set in occupational standards.*"

Solihull's report says "*Apprentices gain a wide range of very good workplace skills that employers value. Consequently, almost all remain in employment on completing their training. Progression opportunities beyond the apprenticeships are good, with high numbers benefiting from pay rises, additional responsibility or promotion. A significant and growing number of advanced apprentices progress to higher education, particularly in engineering and health and social care*".

SCCB were applauded because "*Apprenticeships meet local and regional needs well. The staff communicate well and are responsive to the needs of employers. Partnerships with employers are strong and benefit apprentices through the job opportunities that ensure good skill development and*

progress. Employers report that assessors play a considerable role in teaching the apprentices vital skills. Employers value this input and the considerable benefit that this brings their companies”.

Lastly, BCU have Ofsted good for ITT and Ofsted outstanding for Teach First contracts (neither of these are yet in the areas of apprenticeships).

The work that is carried out by these organisations is critical to the region, and all the more important given the growing skills gap that threatens to suppress the growth that the region is forecasting. Excluding them from RoATP, even on this basis, makes no sense whatsoever.

We understand that the procurement process was intended to raise the quality bar, but unfortunately the converse is true. In Greater Birmingham’s case, as we have said above, “Good” college providers, who are delivering around £12m of provision this year have been excluded whilst elsewhere “Inadequate” organisations are included on RoATP as well as some that have no record of delivery. The procurement process on which the SFA is relying produced a perverse outcome because all four organisations allegedly failed to provide the right words to just one question. Although the evaluation criterion was not made known to the Colleges, it appears that the SFA has entirely ignored evidence of track record. To exacerbate matters, in advance of the outcome being announced, there was no attempt to address any concerns with the Colleges, as required by the SFA’s own process. As a result, all three colleges and BCU have made formal complaints and have indicated that they will consider legal action should an acceptable resolution not be achieved. We cannot agree that the RoATP process was fit for purpose and it did not provide an acceptable outcome, both for our four institutions and for the economy more widely.

The implications of the RoATP process are extremely serious both for the colleges/BCU and for businesses in our region. The four organisations face significant financial stress and damage to their reputations. BMet is on a journey of recovery and, at a time when it was expecting to repay the financial support it received as part of this recovery, will face a significant threat to its plans. Likewise, this decision could potentially jeopardise the South and City’s planned merger with Bournville College, which was one of the key recommendations from the Area Based Review. Other recommendations for the local colleges and universities to form an Apprenticeship Organisation and an Institute of Technology are at risk as is BCU’s proposition the “Skills Engine” within devolution, working collaboratively with the colleges, universities and the private sector in the wider skills eco - system. For Solihull College, the loss of apprenticeship income would move the college from outstanding financial health to inadequate financial health.

How can it be acceptable for Government policy to be undermined so dramatically? Likewise, our local businesses that rely so heavily on the colleges and who this year have spent £12m with them, will be prevented from using them to provide training across the region. It has been said that the other providers will fill this void, but that simply cannot happen; there isn’t the capacity in the market for others to step into the void left by the three colleges and BCU. If they are excluded from the register the region’s skills gap will widen.

Along with the need to get our great institutions onto the RoATP is the need for prompt action to be taken, as time is of the essence. We are told by the colleges that even now their employer partners are making decisions in the lead up to May 1st. Reputations are being damaged and contracts are potentially being lost at this key time in the lead-up to the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy. We ask that the situation is resolved as a matter of urgency and that, whatever the solution, the colleges and BCU are placed on the register, we would stress once again, as a matter of urgency and well before the end of April.

You will know from our deep concern, the strength of feeling that the RoATP process was not fair and proper. We recognise that you will have received representations from the Combined Authority, Birmingham City Council, the Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, UCU and the AoC all making similar points to those above. In that light, we hope that you are able to reconsider excluding the Greater Birmingham colleges and BCU from the RoATP and will give them a fair allocation of the non-levy paying employers funding so that they can continue to lead the delivery of Government policy and work to close the skills gap that is holding back our region and stifling jobs and growth.

We are copying this letter to Greg Clark, Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

Yours sincerely,



Jack Dromey

Member of Parliament for Birmingham Erdington



Gisela Stuart

Member of Parliament for Birmingham Edgbaston



Roger Godsiff

Member of Parliament for Birmingham Hall Green



Richard Burden

Member of Parliament for Birmingham Northfield



Khalid Mahmood

Member of Parliament for Birmingham Perry Barr



Steve McCabe

Member of Parliament for Birmingham Selly Oak



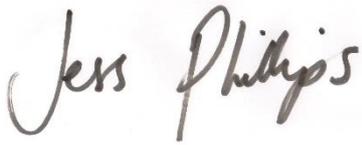
Shabana Mahmood

**Member of Parliament for Birmingham
Ladywood**



The Rt. Hon. Liam Byrne

Member of Parliament for Birmingham Hodge Hill



Jess Phillips

**Member of Parliament for Birmingham
Yardley**



Andrew Mitchell

Member of Parliament for Sutton Coldfield